Nuh Keller on Singing and Dancing

Nuh Ha Mim Keller mentions in his Tariqa Notes[1] that sacred dance is one of the rituals of the Shadhili order. According to him, the sacred dance is a type of dancing performed by Sufis in unison while they make Dhikr (remembrance of Allah). To show the permissibility of it, Keller argues that sacred dancing has 3 components:

1. **Dhikr**
2. **The dancing itself**
3. **Performing it in congregation**

Since each of the above components is permissible if not recommended in its own, therefore –Keller concludes- combining them yields a permissible act of worship.

Although, the fallacy of this argument is so evident, we will – Allah willing- contest it hoping that some of his followers might see the truth. We'll approach this from 2 angles:

1. **By reasoning:**

If we follow the logic Keller uses, then we can say the following:

- It is an established religious fact that praying 4 rak'ahs in Dhuhr is obligatory. So this act has its roots in the Sacred Law.
- It is also well known that praying 2 rak'ahs as a Nafl (voluntary) is recommended, and again it has its roots in the Sacred Law.

Based on the above, one can produce a praise-worthy Bid'ah[2] which states that it is recommended to pray Dhuhr prayer as six rak'ahs instead of four. Keller can't argue this is a blame-worthy Bid'ah if he is to use the logic and textual evidence he provides in his works[3]..

One can provide another example regarding prayer. Keller tries to prove that the companions invented many acts in prayer and it is the Sunnah of the beloved prophet SAAWS to accept that newly invented acts. So by the same line of reasoning, one can argue:

a. Since Nafl (voluntary) prayer is recommended under the Sacred Law.

b. Dancing is permissible under the Sacred Law according to Keller.

c. The Sunnah of the prophet SAAWS is to accept the newly invented matters in prayer so long as they fall under some principle in the Sacred Law, again according to Keller[4].

One can safely say that dancing while praying is permissible if not recommended.

We do not think that a Muslim in his/her right mind will accept this conclusion which indicates that there is a fundamental error in the premises upon which the reasoning process was established. The flaw in Keller's reasoning is that combining several recommended (or permissible) acts of worship does not necessarily yield a religiously permissible act. Acts of worship can't be invented but rather they are extracted from the textual evidence provided in the Qur'aan and the Sunnah. The reader is reminded that the discussion here does not address mundane matters but rather is confined to acts of worship. It is a well accepted general rule that when it comes to acts of worship everything is haraam unless specifically proven halaal (permissible) by a textual evidence from the Qur'aan or the Sunnah. However, for actions other than worship, everything is halaal (permissible) unless proven otherwise[5].

Also, all people are in agreement that it is very disrespectful to dance when addressing an elder or any person of a higher status. If this (Adab) is true for addressing other fellow humans, then how can one argue that it is recommended or even acceptable to dance when addressing Allah SWT the Lord of the universe and all its creation!

1. Textual evidences from the works of Muslim scholars:

In this section, statements of early Muslim scholars about dancing are presented. The list is not meant to be extensive but rather good enough to refute Keller's concept of a sacred dance.

a. **Izz bin Abud salam** (d 660 H) RA: He is a Shafi scholar who was famous with enjoining good and forbidden evil. Keller rightly said about him:

A Shafi'i scholar and mujtahid Imam…though his main and enduring contribution was his masterpiece on Islamic legal principles Qawa'id al-ahkam fi masalih al-alanam [The bases of legal rulings in the interests of mankind][6].

We extract the following quote about dancing from that very book:

"Concerning dancing and clapping, they are considered acts of Khiffah immaturity and foolishness similar to the foolishness of females[7] which is only done by a foolish or a phony person…the prophet SAAWS has said: 'the best of generations is my generation, then the one that comes after them, and then the one that comes after them' and none of those –whom people take as role models- used to do any of this (clapping and dancing)[8]. In fact, Satan has taken over people who think that the excitement they experience when listening to singing is concerning Allah 'Azz wa jalla but verily they lied about this."

Izz continues:

"It is not becoming from one -who fears Allah and has some respect to Him- to clap or dance. These two (clapping and dancing) originate only from a foolish ignorant. They do not originate from sane and pious. As an evidence of the ignorance of whoever does them is that the Shari'ah (Sacred Law) did not legislate them neither in the Qur'aan nor in the Sunnah, and none of the prophets had done them, nor any of their real followers. They are only performed by the ignorant immature people who confuse truth with desires. Allah SWT said: 'We have We have not neglected anything in the Book, then to their Lord shall they be gathered' (Surah 6, verse 38). The early Muslim generations and the pious among the late generations had proceeded without embracing any of that (clapping and dancing)"

The above quote is exceptionally clear and shows beyond any question that Sheikh Izz ibn Abdul Salam completely opposed any form of dancing as worship.

Ironically Keller quotes Sheikh Izz ibn Abdul Salam's statement where he divided Bid'ah into five categories as a basis to prove the legitimacy of Sufi Dhikr (litany). However the statements of Izz mentioned above show that Izz's concept of Bid'ah is completely different from what Keller made it out to be.

b. Al-Fatawa al-Hindiyyah (Islamic rulings issued in India):

al-Fatawa al-Hindiyyah is a collection of Islamic rulings issued and compiled by a group of Hanafi scholars from India. This scholarly work was in response to a request by the Muslim king of India and a Islamic scholar in his own standing, Muhammad Aurangzeb. In this collection of Fatawa (Islamic rulings) one finds the following:

"The Sama' (listening to singing), singing poetry, and dancing that Sufis do these days are impermissible; both going to it and attending it are not permissible. These actions are similar to singing and music[10].

c. The encyclopedia of Islamic Jurisprudence

This is a huge work of Islamic Jurisprudence put together by a host of contemporary Muslim Jurists. The following is a quote from their work under the title “Dancing, whirling, drums and using wind instruments”:

“Some people of Bid’ah add to Dhikr –besides what has been discussed earlier- other things.

Al-Shatibi[11] (d 790 H) said: ‘I wish they stopped at this –which in itself is blameworthy- but on top of that they have progressed into dancing, using wind instruments, whirling, and beating their chests; some bang their heads. How similar this is to the laughable acts of the foolish ones! This is so because these actions of theirs belong to kids and insane, it causes sane people to cry in sympathy for them since this can’t be taken as a path to Allah, and a way to resemble the pious ones.’

Al-Ajiry (d 360 H) said: ‘it has to be said to whoever did this (dancing, whirling, etc): know that the most truthful when admonishing, the most sincere to his Ummah, and the one with the softest heart[12] and the best among the people who came after him[13] -with no doubt- never screamed when they were admonished, nor cried out loudly or danced. If these acts were acceptable then they (the companions) are the most entitled to do them in front of the Prophet SAAWS, however (they did not) because it is Bid’ah, falsehood, and evil.’ ”

The evidences mentioned above should be sufficient to a reader who seeks the truth. We refuted Keller’s argument, concerning dancing and singing as an act of worship, by reasoning first and then by providing clear statements by renowned scholars of Islam.

Footnotes :

[1] Tariqa Notes by Nuh Ha Mim Keller, page 19

[2] The correct opinion is that no such thing as praise-worthy Bid'ah. We are using Keller's terminology for the sake of argument only. For detailed discussion about Bid'ah, go to our page on Bid'ah.

[3] & [4] See the section about Bid'ah in Reliance of the Traveler. If the book is not accessible, then the reader may see our article about Bid'ah in the link mentioned in 2 above. It is a refutation of Keller's arguments in his book.

[5] The only exceptions for this according to scholars are: human life, assets, having sexual relationship, and meat.

[6] Reliance of the traveler, page 1064.

[7] With all due respect to Imam Izz bin Abdul salam, we –humbly- disagree with this generalization. Many men commit all types of foolishness.

[8] This is another proof that Izz considers the actions of the early 3 generation as the measuring stick to gauge the legitimacy of a new invented matter. This issue is explained into a great length in the article about Bid'ah.

[9] Reliance of the traveler, page 915 and 916

[10] He assumes the reader knows that these are impermissible by the Shari'ah

[11] Imam al-Shatibi is a very distinguished Maliki scholar of Islamic Jurisprudence and principles of Jurisprudence. He is from Andalusia. Among his outstanding work is al-'Itisam (a two volume of scholarly work about the Sunnah and Bid'ah) and al-Muwafaqaat (a four volume book in principles of Jurisprudence).

[12] He means the prophet SAAWS

[13] He means the companions RA